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INTELLIGENCE MEMORANDUM



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INTERNATIONAL BOUNDARIES OF INDOCHINA



CENTRAL INTELLIGENCE AGENCY

OFFICE OF RESEARCH AND REPORTS

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INTERNATIONAL BOUNDARIES OF INDOCHINA

Active or potential disagreement exists on the alignments of several of the international boundaries of former Indochina. Recently published North Vietnamese maps, for example, depict the North Vietnam - Laos boundary differently from official US and French maps. Similarly, annotated boundary maps transmitted to the United States by Cambodia indicate important differences between the official Cambodian and South Vietnamese versions of their mutual boundary. This memorandum constitutes a report on the status of all boundaries in Indochina, with special attention to their historical origins and the points of current instability.

Background

Indochina has eight international boundaries (counting the Laotian boundary with North Vietnam and South Vietnam as a single boundary), in addition to the provisional military demarcation line between North Vietnam and South Vietnam. No active dispute concerns the exterior boundaries of Indochina -- those with China, Burma, and Thailand -- which for most of their extent are demarcated.* Thailand accepts its boundary with Cambodia, however, only on a de facto basis and maintains a rather vague reservation concerning the 1962 International Court of Justice (ICJ) acknowledgment of Cambodian sovereignty over the Preah Vihear Temple site on the border. The interior boundaries -- those between the component states of former Indochina -- are generally undemarcated and consequently susceptible to dispute. The potential for trouble is illustrated by Cambodia's repeated protests against attacks on Cambodian border villages by South Vietnamese armed forces. Another source of trouble between Cambodia and South Vietnam is the dispute that has persisted for the last decade as to the ownership of islands in the Gulf of Siam. Most recently, North Vietnam's cartographic claims to the Laotian area west of the Vietnamese Demilitarized Zone (DMZ) appear to provide the basis for its accusations that Laotian aircraft are bombing "North Vietnamese" towns in that area.

All of the boundaries and the conflicting national attitudes toward them have important roots in Indochina's colonial history. As shown on Figure 1, Indochina in the late 17th century comprised the deteriorating Cambodian (Khmer) Kingdom, Laos, the remains of the Kingdom of Champa, and the separate Kingdoms of Tonkin and Cochin China -- the former Annamite Empire (Kingdom of Dai-co-viet, known to the Chinese as An-nan, "the pacified south"). During the 17th century, huge walls that for 150 years separated the Kingdom of Tonkin from the Kingdom of Cochin China were built across the Quang Tri plain a few miles north of the present Demarcation Line. At that time Cambodia extended northward from the Gulf of Siam almost to 16°N and encompassed the southwestern portion of present-day Laos that lies west of the Mekong River, as well as the present-day provinces of Sédone and Attopeu, which are east of the river. Eastward, the Cambodian Kingdom extended far into present-day South Vietnam. Cambodia's current mainland territorial claims against South Vietnam are based on this historical expanse of the Cambodian Kingdom. Further, the presence of many ethnic Khmer (Khmer Krom) in South Vietnam, a factor that still complicates the Cambodian-Vietnamese relationship, dates from this era.

* A demarcated boundary is one that has been marked physically on the ground with official pillars or other devices. A boundary established by a set line, such as the thalweg (line of the deepest navigable channel), in or along a water body also may be regarded as demarcated.

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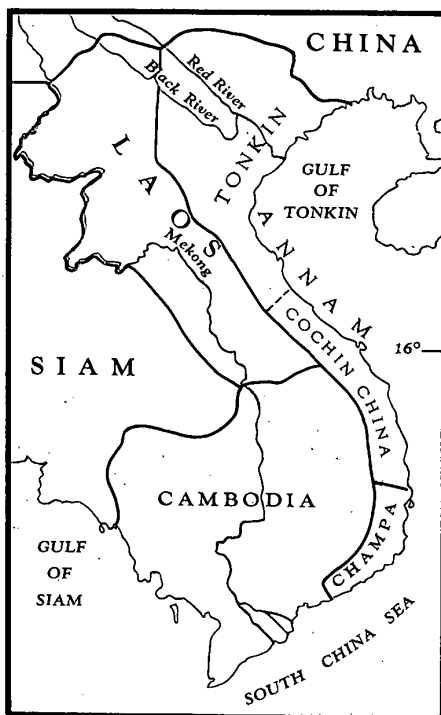


Figure 1.
Indochina in the late 17th century.

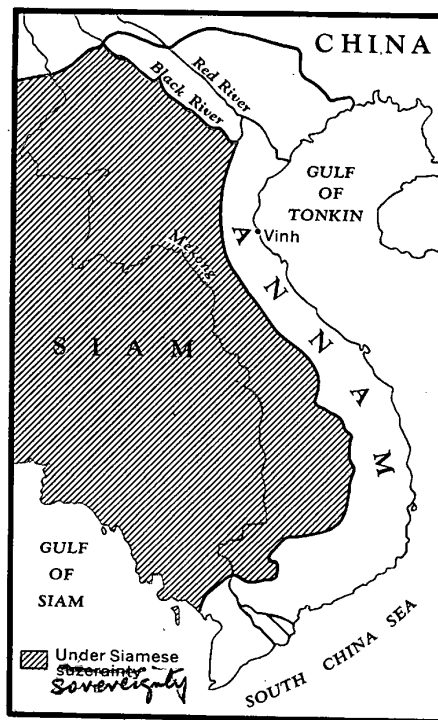


Figure 2.
Indochina about 1860 (showing areas of Cambodia and Laos under Siamese sovereignty).

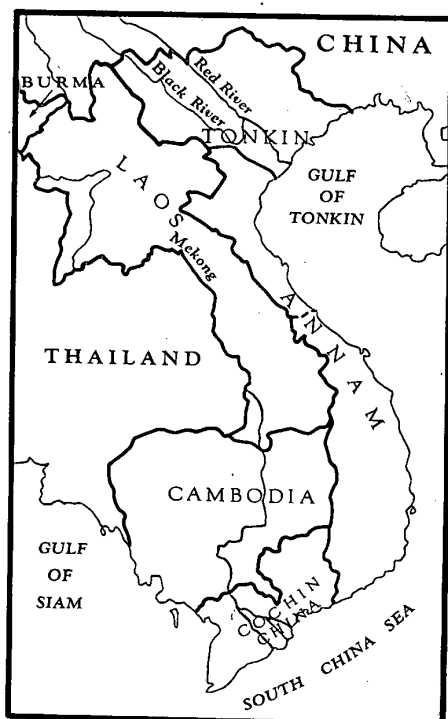


Figure 3.
Indochina, 1940.

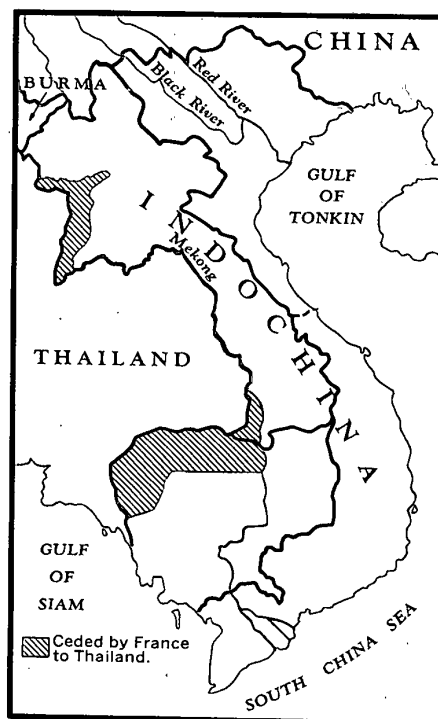


Figure 4.
Areas ceded by France to Thailand, March 1941 (subsequently returned by 1946 settlement agreement).

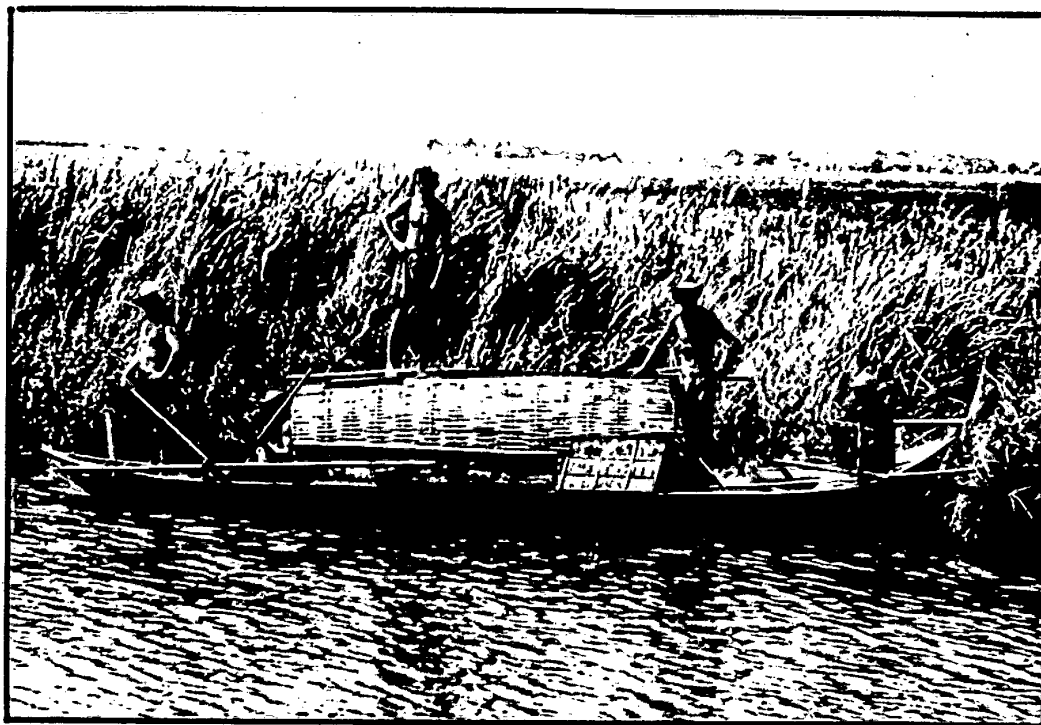


Figure 5. Plain of Reeds

View of terrain and vegetation in area between Song (River) Vam Co Dong and Song Vam Co Tay, near Cambodia-South Vietnam border. In such an environment, the location of an undemarcated boundary is extremely difficult to determine.

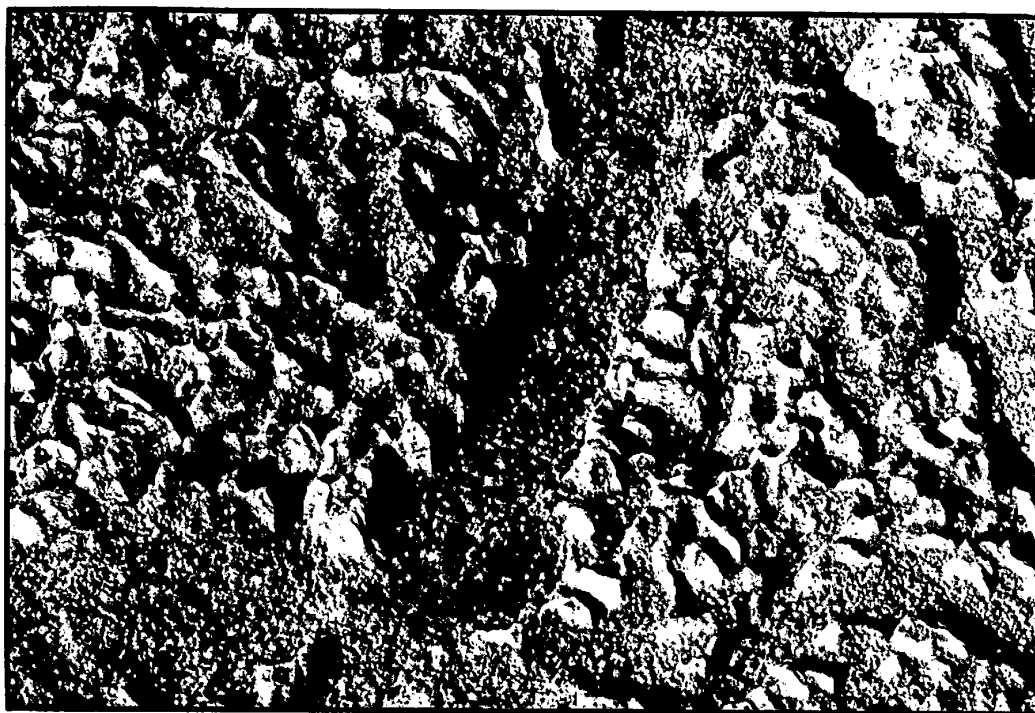


Figure 6. Aerial View of Limestone Area

A portion of the great limestone belt, a no-man's land that bisects Laos and extends across Vietnam-Laos border southeast of Deo (Pass) Mu Gia (see Map 51019). In this area, France delimited the boundary in a straight line because drainage is subterranean and conventional water divides are lacking.

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By the beginning of the 19th century the Annamite emperor had reunited Tonkin and Cochin China into a single country that extended into the Mekong Delta, which the Cambodians had been forced to evacuate. In the latter part of the 19th century, France, whose interest in Indochina dated from the arrival of French missionaries in the early 17th century, demanded a halt to the persecution of Christian converts by the Annamite government. The persecutions continued, and France finally defeated Annam by military force. Siam, taking advantage of the Annamite defeat, then consolidated its control in the area of the middle Mekong River and the adjoining parts of Laos and northern Cambodia (see Figure 2) and threatened to advance eastward to the sea at Vinh but was forced back by French troops. Between 1893 and 1907 Siam ceded the following three areas to France: in 1893, all territory on the left bank* of the Mekong River and islands in the river; in 1902, the areas of the present-day Laotian provinces of Sayaboury, Champassak, and Sithandone -- all on the right bank of the Mekong River; and in 1907, the former Cambodian provinces of Angkor and Battambang, which France had relinquished to Siam in 1867.

The other exterior boundaries of Indochina were settled during the period 1887-96. Between 1887 and 1895 China agreed to the delimitation** and demarcation of what are now the North Vietnam - China boundary and the Laos - China boundary. In 1896 Great Britain and France agreed to use the Mekong River as the border between Laos and Burma.

By the close of the 19th century, France had thus created a colonial entity consisting of Tonkin, Annam, Cochin China, Cambodia, and Laos (see Figure 3). Except for minor boundary changes between these components that were largely the result of French administrative actions, this was the Indochina that was conquered by Japan in 1941.

The Japanese Government, in late 1940, encouraged Thailand to attack Indochina and then, in March 1941, acted as arbitrator to a dispute that resulted in Thailand reacquiring territory from Laos and Cambodia (see Figure 4). In 1946 these territories were returned to Laos and Cambodia by the Washington Accord between France and Siam. No changes in Indochina's exterior boundaries have been made since this agreement, other than the 1962 ICJ decision on the site of the Preah Vihear Temple.

Summary analyses of both the interior and exterior boundaries of Indochina are given on the reverse side of this memorandum.***

* The banks of a river are designated as right or left as one faces downstream.

** A delimited boundary is one whose alignment has been agreed upon and described in a treaty or other formal document. The fact that a boundary is delimited does not mean that it is demarcated or that it can even be located on the ground with precision.

*** More detailed discussion of the boundaries of the individual countries treated here may be found in the International Boundary Study series prepared by the Office of the Geographer, Department of State.

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